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Winner of the '08 Robert T. Wilson Award
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"You Can't Keep a Good Dog Down": American Mythology
and the (Im)Possibilities of Change in *All Dogs Go to Heaven*

Emily Toler '08



Film is regarded as little more than a visual aid, as an interesting or entertaining garnish to the more substantial and traditional fare of research and pedagogy... [and] serious consideration of American film as American art, criticism, history, ideology, and culture is inhibited... Thus, as literature, as history, as significant culture, as rhetorical discourse, American films have for the most part been abused or neglected by American Studies.

Vivian C. Sobchack

In the quarter-century that has elapsed since Vivian Sobchack penned this lament, the boundaries of "scholarship" have expanded in recognition of the social, cultural, and historical significance of American film. Numerous film journals have been established, and their contributions to cultural studies have been acknowledged; films have become integral to the curricula of diverse courses and institutions; scholars have published articles investigating such diverse films as *Citizen Kane* and *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*. The United States' films are finally used as valuable tools for representing and analyzing its culture – and rightfully so. The two are, as Sobchack observes, "mutually interdependent, each illuminating and providing a context for the other" (281). This interdependence mirrors the relationship between American literature and American culture: each informs the other, weaving (and being woven by) a complex web of history, sociology, and a preoccupation with certain mythic themes. Because the United States' films address these same issues, it seems logical

to consider the ways that they, like the nation's literature, employ these uniquely American myths to expose and potentially critique the culture of which they are a product and in which they participate.

Don Bluth's *All Dogs Go to Heaven* (1989) offers a unique opportunity to analyze how these mythic themes have been incorporated and interpreted in film. This animated movie tells the story of a dog named Charlie B. Barkin's quest for material success. After breaking out of the pound, Charlie tries to resume business with his former partner Carface, who has Charlie killed. Although Charlie goes to heaven, he steals a watch that enables him to return to the mortal world and seek his revenge. With the help of his sidekick Itchy, Charlie befriends an orphan girl named Anne-Marie and exploits her ability to talk to animals, using her to win bets at racetracks and hoarding the profits to open a casino of his own. As the story develops, however, Charlie grows increasingly attached to Anne-Marie and is ultimately forced to choose between saving himself and saving her.

In this paper, I analyze how *All Dogs Go to Heaven* incorporates and reshapes American mythic themes, suggesting that this film makes extensive use of two salient cultural toposes: the "triumphant underdog" and "moral redemption." After illuminating the evidence of these motifs, I interpret their function in relation to dominant ideology, situating my investigation in a Marxist-feminist framework. Finally, I evaluate the film's subversive potential and consider the implications of its cultural position and ideological agenda.

All Dogs Go to Heaven opens in 1939 at a New Orleans casino that caters to a unique, exclusively canine, clientele. Its inebriated patrons are gambling on intermittent rat races – thinly-disguised metaphors for the "rat race" of consumerist, capitalist society – that set the tone for the rest of the film. In the first race, a scraggy rat named Squadcar competes with four more robust animals. Although the stronger animals initially lead, Squadcar cleverly latches onto an opponent's tail and catapults himself across the finish line to victory. Similar patterns subsequently emerge: the Grand Chawhee, a decrepit horse, is the unlikely winner of his race; a tiny turtle bests a field of formidable opponents by deploying his hidden speed.

This same theme of usurpation is evident in the first song that the protagonist Charlie sings. Recently liberated from the pound, he has returned to reestablish business relations with his onetime partner Carface. When the casino's patrons express surprise that he has come back, Charlie avers that, even though his current socioeconomic position is somewhat less than desirable, his ambitions will not be stymied:

Oh, you can't keep a good dog down. No, you
can't keep a good dog down.
Look out, I'm still around, 'cause you can't
keep a good dog down...
So call me a mixed-up pup, but the only way
this pup knows is up!...
I've known hunger, I've known thirst, lived the
best and seen the worst,
But the only way I know to finish is to finish
first!

The message this song sends is clear: *if he is clever and cunning enough, the underdog can win*. But Charlie's interpretation of the "triumphant underdog" trope fails to establish any respectable moral or ethical guidelines that its devotees should observe. The film's minor underdogs win by relatively legitimate means: Squadcar hitches a ride, but his own ingenuity enables his victory; the Grand Chawhee triumphs because his competitors willingly submit, but he himself does not cheat; the tiny turtle is justly rewarded for his speed. This contrast is particularly disturbing, as Charlie's preferred methods of success are less than honorable – and his motives are little better.

Indeed, Charlie is profoundly acquisitive, concerned almost exclusively with material gain. His first act after escaping the pound is to revisit his casino where, when the other dogs beg him to "spare a couple'a bones for old time's sake," Charlie asks: "Why settle for a couple'a bones when you can have the whole bank?" Similarly, when Carface suggests dissolving the partnership, Charlie is concerned with profiting – but not with losing his supposed friend. Consider their exchange:

"Fifty percent of this is yours, right, Charlie?
Take it. You want a cut of the steaks?"
"T-Bones? Porterhouses?"

"And one half of the mignons!"

Charlie's response, focused solely on maximizing his fleshy earnings, belies his avariciousness. Carface, too, is guilty of materialism; his cheeky reply demonstrates that both he and Charlie consider their partnership a purely economic enterprise. This lack of amity is made most apparent when Carface, who professes that he "does not wish that he should share fifty percent of the business," opts to kill his partner rather than compromise his own income.

Ironically, Charlie's murder gives him his first chance at moral redemption – another salient theme in the American cultural canon. In *All Dogs Go to Heaven*, this opportunity for ethical reform is invariably represented by a female character who exhibits many of the traits associated with essentialist feminism. This theoretical perspective asserts that there exists "a basic 'truth' about woman that patriarchal society has kept hidden" and that, to challenge this society, women can "abandon/reject socially constructed roles [and] adopt other, more truly female ones" (Kaplan 9). Although the specific characteristics that constitute "truly female roles" are certainly subject to debate, the purposes they fulfill seem similar:

The essential aspects of woman, repressed in patriarchy, are often assumed to embody a more humane, moral mode of being, which, once brought to light, could help change society in a beneficial direction. Female values become a means for critiquing the harsh, competitive, and individualistic "male" values that govern society and offer an alternate way, not only of *seeing* but of *being* that threatens patriarchy. (Kaplan 9)

In *All Dogs Go to Heaven*, two female characters perform this function: Annabelle, a dog-angel who manages heaven, and Anne-Marie, an orphan who can talk to animals.

After his murder, Charlie enters heaven through a red-and-pink tunnel unmistakably evocative of a birth – or rebirth – canal. This association with female organs and processes suggests that the path to moral redemption (heaven) can be obtained only through a female proxy. In heaven, Annabelle attempts to convince Charlie that a paradisiacal moral life of "doing whatever you wish, laughing and singing all day" is

preferable to a material life of "used cars and singles bars," but his masculine, immoral desire for revenge compels Charlie to return to the mortal world. (It seems that the mantra he professes at the casino – "I tried a life of virtue but prefer a life of sin" – holds true even in paradise!) Mythic moral redemption requires a complete transformation, however, so this malfunction can be only temporary. Because this trope is so closely associated with essentialist femininity, the agent who will transform Charlie must be another female character: Anne-Marie.

It is clear from the scene in which Anne-Marie is introduced that she, like Annabelle, embodies many of the hallmark traits that essentialist feminism describes. She is, quite literally, "repressed in patriarchy" (Kaplan 9); Carface has imprisoned her, abusing her ability to talk to animals to maximize his profits in the casino. But Anne-Marie's morality remains untainted by these "competitive and individualistic 'male' values" (9). She remains concerned with the well-being of Carface's rats: "[You have] a sore foot? You shouldn't run! And Twizzle has a cold? She should drink soup! And Squadcar has the flu? Oh, my." This female morality sharply contrasts the ethical voids of the male characters, whose primary concerns are materialistic.

When Charlie realizes that Anne-Marie's abilities can help him get the money he needs to take his revenge, he convinces her to leave Carface and join him – but only by promising her that they will "give the money to the poor" and that he will buy her "a new dress and new shoes... [because] nobody wants a scrawny little doll in rags." This is a particularly egregious example of Charlie's moral shortcomings: he blatantly lies about his plans for their proceeds (which will actually be used to realize his own ambitions) and shamelessly exploits Anne-Marie's desire to be adopted, suggesting that she will only be appealing with certain material possessions. Anne-Marie's unimpeachable *goodness* has already been established, so it is not surprising that she is outraged and threatens to abandon Charlie after discovering his lies. Because she is so valuable, Charlie has no choice but to acquiesce to her demands and share some of his profits with a poor canine family. Here, the goals of essentialist feminist critique are at least partially realized. Instead of sacrificing the "essential aspects of woman

[that] embody a more humane, moral mode of being," Anne-Marie uses those very traits to "help change society in a beneficial direction" (Kaplan 9). Moreover, by driving Charlie to altruism, she accomplishes two tasks: immediately benefiting the family he helps and sparking the moral transformation that is brought to fruition when Charlie sacrifices his own life to save hers.

Although it is clear that this essentialist female morality serves as the mythic agent of redemption, determining precisely what Charlie is being redeemed *from* is more problematic. The most obvious possibility is that he is being delivered from his greedy consumerism, as the film is rich with moments that enable a Marxist interpretation. Anne-Marie's insistence on helping the poor could certainly be considered an ethical norm; she is clearly the film's moral center, so it seems logical to conclude that the principles shaping her morality should shape those of the rest of the characters. Even before Anne-Marie's moral centrality is established, however, Charlie hints that he, too, might harbor a concern for the poor. On their first night together, he reads Anne-Marie excerpts from *Robin Hood* as a bedtime story:

So Robin Hood says to Little John, "This sheriff is a real bimbo. What say we knock him off and take the gold? Not for ourselves; we'll give it to the poor, worthless suckers who got it took in the first place."... So all the poor people was happy 'cause they wasn't poor now.

Charlie's interpretation, however unrefined, suggests that he is at least marginally concerned with the welfare of others.

More evidence that *All Dogs Go to Heaven* may advance Marxist themes comes when Anne-Marie convinces Charlie to share his earnings with the poor. The pair delivers a meal of pizza and cake "some of the poorest people" Charlie knows: a large canine family that is "broker than the Ten Commandments." The hungry puppies immediately attack the pizza, tearing into it in a frenetic free-for-all until there is only one piece left. The puppies vie for ownership until Charlie expresses an egalitarian vision through song:

What's mine is yours; what's yours is mine.
The more you share, the more the sun'll shine.

Whether you're the boss or someone's pet,
The more you give, the more you're gonna get.

You got a little or a lot, you got to share,
'cause you know what:

Each other's all that we have got.

The sun'll shine if you share all the time.

This emphasis on sharing and community represents an egalitarian ethos that is markedly different from the one Charlie previously affirmed. Anne-Marie's morality has radically transformed him, so it seems reasonable to conclude that he has been saved from his selfishness and materialism. The final analysis, however, is less straightforward. Although these moments challenge the individualistic dogma of capitalism, their effects are ultimately negated.

For example, Anne-Marie is concerned with helping the poor – but equally concerned with ensuring her own welfare. One of the conditions under which she agrees to help Charlie is that she will be able to buy a new dress and shoes to impress potential parents, and she remains dissatisfied until Charlie takes her shopping. When she meets the couple who eventually adopt her, she even introduces herself explicitly in terms of these possessions: "My name is Anne-Marie. I'm getting a new dress!" Her selfish impulses are made most obvious when she visits the couple's home. Anne-Marie comments that it "is the most beautiful house [she] has ever seen" and subsequently tells Charlie that "Harold and Kate are really wonderful [because] they gave me real waffles with butter and syrup." Clearly – albeit surprisingly – Anne-Marie evaluates these characters in terms of the material benefits they can provide her; even she cannot escape the consumerist ideology that undergirds her culture.

Less surprising, perhaps, is that Charlie's reading of *Robin Hood* is patently capitalistic. Itchy's responses to the story demonstrate how deeply ingrained this ideology is: "Hey, Boss, where do you get that stuff? What kind of Hood is this guy – giving to the poor without taking his cut?... This Hood guy's out fifty percent." Moreover, Charlie tells this story while actually holding Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. This substitution demonstrates that there is no room in Charlie's world for the egalitarian ideals of Robin Hood. Indeed, there is no room in

any of the characters' worlds for such ideas: even the puppies who affirm the importance of sharing immediately reject these very principles when they dive with selfish voracity into a cake that Charlie brings them.

These complexities make it difficult to draw conclusions about the agendas advanced in *All Dogs Go to Heaven*. To interpret the film as a protest against capitalist materialism would be a mistake; it contains too many affirmations of the *status quo* to contend that director Bluth intended to critique the American economic system. Similarly, to interpret the film as a feminist project celebrating essentialist female morality would be too simplistic. Although her morality does give her some power as the film's redemptive agent, Anne-Marie ultimately accepts her role in patriarchy: she opts for a pink feather bed in a homogenous subdivision instead of a pillow in the back of an abandoned car, even though the latter might more effectively enable her to "change society in a beneficial direction" (Kaplan 9).

This intricacy complicates the project of interpretation, but it does not ultimately preclude conclusions. Because *All Dogs Go to Heaven* relies so heavily on American mythic themes, it is an excellent example of how "films reflect in a deceptively effortless way the nightmare and dream imagery which is part of our aesthetic and cultural heritage" (Sobchack 291-2). This film is more than a simple children's story; it is an exploration of the fundamental components of a complex, sometimes contradictory, ideology. Like much American art, *All Dogs Go to Heaven*

both covertly and overtly [confronts] the tensions inherent in our concept of personal success and its paradoxical suspension of two contradictory impulses – one democratic, ethical, social, and work-oriented, the other elitist, pragmatic, individualistic, and reward-oriented. (Sobchack 291)

The manifestations of these tensions in the film are numerous. Charlie, the underdog, wrestles constantly with his greed and his impulse to help others – a conflict that is resolved only when he sacrifices himself to save his female companion. Even ethical Anne-Marie struggles to reconcile her concern for others with her contradictory desire for a home of her own. Although the

film may leave viewers comfortable with its conclusion, it is hardly a "happy ending." Yes, Charlie is ostensibly redeemed by Anne-Marie's essentialist female morality, and yes, Anne-Marie finds a home, but this resolution merely affirms the hegemony of capitalist ideology.

Charlie's reformation is not only moral – it has an economic dimension as well. When he saves Anne-Marie's life by sacrificing his own, Charlie rejects the individualism that once governed his behavior and led him to proclaim that "the only way [he] knows to finish is to finish first." This impulse, of course, is vital for the capitalist economic system to function; without the desire for individual material gain to drive it, capitalism fails. Charlie's implicit rejection of this ideology in favor of a more selfless one therefore renders him useless to a capitalist society, and as a result, he dies. Moreover, even though Anne-Marie embodies the essentialist qualities that might enable her to challenge patriarchal institutions, she ultimately rejects those characteristics in favor of a life in suburban America, where women are given the power only to cook waffles. Because her new lifestyle fits within an androcentric framework, Anne-Marie not only lives but prospers. These very different conclusions send a clear message: *to live in America, you must accept its dominant ideology*.

Thus, it seems that *All Dogs Go to Heaven* does not meaningfully critique American capitalist society or its concomitant ideology. Instead, this film, like all "signifying systems, [is a] human creation which [reflects] the attitudes of [its] creator... [and] necessarily involves an interpretation of reality and implies certain values" (Gaggi 463). In this case, those values are the ones necessary for the success of capitalism: individualism, materialism, and consumerism. It seems that this film adequately fulfills "its role as a conveyor of ideology within the class struggle" (462).

This authentication of capitalist hegemony is particularly problematic in light of the film's self-consciousness and context. *All Dogs Go to Heaven* clearly illuminates socioeconomic tensions – Charlie's reinterpretation of the tale of Robin Hood; his pleas for the impoverished puppies to share their pizza – which demonstrates that its creators recognize the problems of inequality. But their position of discursive

authority, from which they can potentially advocate change, is undermined by their decision to affirm the values of capitalism; apparently, the stranglehold of dominant ideology is inescapable. Perhaps the most unnerving consequence of this hegemony is that this film has been marketed primarily to children and has therefore helped to create a generation indoctrinated by the unquestioning acceptance of prescribed values. *All Dogs Go to Heaven* ultimately affirms that a "good dog" is a complacent dog – and, as Charlie observes, "you can't keep a good dog down."

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